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ABSTRACT

This digest presents an overview of English as a Second Language (ESL) curriculum, discussing various approaches and assessment efforts at community colleges, and examining some current issues facing ESL instruction. Although the general goals of ESL programs are similar, instruction within community colleges is not standardized. Different approaches to structuring ESL programs have yielded the following: (1) a well-conceptualized ESL curriculum incorporates students' experience and provides a holistic approach to learning the course material including tips on how to survive the "culture of the academy"; (2) research on developmental curriculum and pedagogy have helped develop use of paired classes, language and computer labs, and distance education, with certified bilingual instructors teaching math, science, art, social sciences and English; and (3) trained ESL tutors can contribute greatly to students' success. Assessment efforts of ESL program performance are often complicated by a variety of program offerings and a diverse student body. Standardization between different community college programs is rare. ESL issues and challenges include awarding of course credit, course funding mechanisms, student access to financial aid and debate over which educational institutions should be responsible for providing ESL instruction. Contains 10 references. (PGS)

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English as a Second Language: Program Approaches at Community Colleges

By Elaine W. Kuo

With the increasing enrollment of non-native English speakers in higher education, English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction has become one of the fastest growing programs in the community college curriculum. According to a 1998 study of curriculum in community colleges nationwide, there was a 38% increase in ESL course offerings between 1991 and1998 (Kuo, 1999; Schuyler, 1999). This Digest examines the status of these programs by presenting an overview of the ESL curriculum, discussing various approaches and assessment efforts at community colleges, and examining some current issues facing ESL instruction.

The ESL Curriculum

ESL programs aim to help non-native English speakers learn the new language and provide them with the skills to persist in academic coursework and function in society. Although the general goals of ESL programs are similar, Shoemaker (1996) discovered that ESL instruction within the community colleges is far from standardized. This is demonstrated in the four distinct curricular designs Ignash (1995) found in the large ESL programs at six community colleges (California, Florida, Illinois, Oregon, New Jersey, and Texas).

- The truncated design is comprised of noncredit, beginning and intermediate level ESL programs.
- The academic design provides credit to all ESL courses found within an academic department except for non-credit beginning level courses.
- The comprehensive design is similar to the academic design, but serves more students by offering a breadth of course offerings, with both credit and non-credit ESL courses available to students of all levels of English proficiency.
- The credit design awards credit for almost all ESL classes and also helps ESL students make the transition from ESL to regular courses.

Although ESL programs bring together disparate groups of people from different backgrounds, these students share unfamiliarity with the English language and American culture. Successful ESL curricular designs attempt to address these student needs to ensure proper acclimation to the new environment.

ESL Program Approaches

One approach is to incorporate techniques typically used with underprepared students. Kimmel and Davis (1996) operationalize Rose's theory (1989) that underprepared students lack more than just the cognitive skills needed to be productive academically; they also lack basic social survival skills necessary to navigate the academic environment. Similarly, for most ESL students the American education system is difficult to navigate, regardless of their previous academic experiences. Thus, a well-conceptualized ESL curriculum incorporates these students' experiences and provides a holistic approach to learning the course material including tips on how to survive the "culture of the academy" (Kimmel & Davis, 1996, p. 71).

Other ESL programs have incorporated the research on developmental curriculum and pedagogy. These efforts included the use of paired classes, language and computer labs, and distance education. The Bilingual Immersion Program at Compton Community College (CA) attempted to provide a more sheltered English orientation. A five-year plan provided instruction in English and college prep coursework as well as basic skills necessary for survival in the classroom and workplace. Certified bilingual instructors taught math, science, art, social sciences, and English. In addition, ESL students were required to utilize the community college's tutorial program (Comacho, 1995).

The role of ESL tutors can contribute greatly to student success. At Bronx Community College (NY), an institution serving about 1,500 ESL students, tutors were trained in pedagogical techniques encouraging independent thinking (Misick and Santa Rita, 1996). Demonstrating the need for ESL programs to expand beyond the traditional tutoring interaction, the college created a student development tutoring model (SDTM) emphasizing the importance of learning strategies. Tutors were trained to be active with the subject material, to engage the students directly to increase their understanding, and to foster student confidence to operate independently. These tutors not only helped their students gain the immediate academic knowledge needed for current coursework, but they also helped the students become better information processors. Pedagogical techniques focused on twenty tutor-specific behaviors, such as developing listening skills and setting high expectations, so that the tutoring relationship could be more co-constructed.

Assessment

Assessments have been conducted to determine the effects of ESL programs on student outcomes. Educators at New York City Technical College wanted to know if their ESL courses promoted positive academic outcomes within the general curriculum (Gerardi, 1996). Comparing the credits earned, matriculation rate, and grade point averages (GPA) of native-born students to new immigrant students, the authors found that immigrant students, who initially enrolled in the ESL

program, tended to have lower GPAs and earned fewer total credits earned than native students. However, these findings may be clouded due to the direct comparison of new immigrants with the mainstream student population, rather than with a more comparable sub-population of English-speaking students such as those enrolled in remediation courses. Still, immigrant students seemed more engaged in college because they were more likely to take advantage of the various services offered by the institution (e.g. tutoring, counseling, computer facilities, etc.). In addition, they had a 63 percent rate of persistence compared to 55 percent of those native-born. These data suggested that the ESL program at New York City Technical College led to positive outcomes for new immigrant students.

Assessment efforts are often complicated by a variety of program offerings and a diverse student body. A study by the Florida State Board of Community Colleges (1996) indicated many differences in courses and programs between colleges. While most of the community colleges administrators in Florida felt relatively satisfied with their existing program and policies, there was little consistency across institutions, especially in identification and placement procedures. In fact, ten institutions did not offer any ESL courses and limited English students took courses with native speakers. Many of these institutions, located in the more rural parts of Florida, struggled with the unprecedented and unexpected increases of the non-English speaking population. Concern was expressed about the lack of instructional and counseling support for the staff because ESL programs were often staffed with part-time, inexperienced instructors. The Florida State Board recommended that the state create some standardization among the various ESL programs to ease assessment efforts.

Issues and Challenges

Current issues being discussed in relation to ESL programs at community colleges include the awarding of course credit, access to financial aid and provider status. First, the debate on the status of ESL instruction as a credit or non-credit course centers on the funding category of these courses. Because state funding more directly supports non-credit ESL courses, there is less incentive to change the status of these courses (Ignash, 1995; Kurzet, 1997). As a result, ESL students who are unable to apply any of their coursework toward the community college graduation requirements may experience prolonged time and increased costs in their education experience.

Second, access to financial aid is an issue of increasing concern. Critics complain that ESL students have a lower rate of persistence and should be ineligible for aid. Ignash (1995) argues that additional financial assistance could contribute to increased persistence levels since ESL students take considerably longer to complete their academic goals due to their limited English proficiency. Perhaps community colleges need to increase their role in tracking ESL students in order to help guide funding decisions (Ignash, 1995).

Finally, the debate continues on who is responsible for providing ESL instruction. Should it belong to the community colleges or local school district adult programs? State and federal policies have collided in this debate (Ignash, 1995). Previous federal funding expanded ESL offerings in community colleges, but when the funding ended for some programs, states assumed responsibility by offering similar non-credit programs at adult schools. As a result, both community colleges and adults schools are competing for limited funds to serve the same ESL students.

Conclusions

Community colleges offer a broad spectrum of ESL programs to a diverse group of students. The programs represent an increasingly important aspect of institutional missions and are the subject of considerable interest and debate. As community colleges continue to experience high demand for ESL courses, the institutions will be challenged to deal with these issues and offer programs and services that maintain access and motivate their students (Kurzet, 1997).

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